

MEMORANDUM  
RM-4692-1-ARPA  
APRIL 1966

EVOLUTION OF A  
VIETNAMESE VILLAGE — PART II:  
THE PAST, AUGUST 1945 TO APRIL 1964

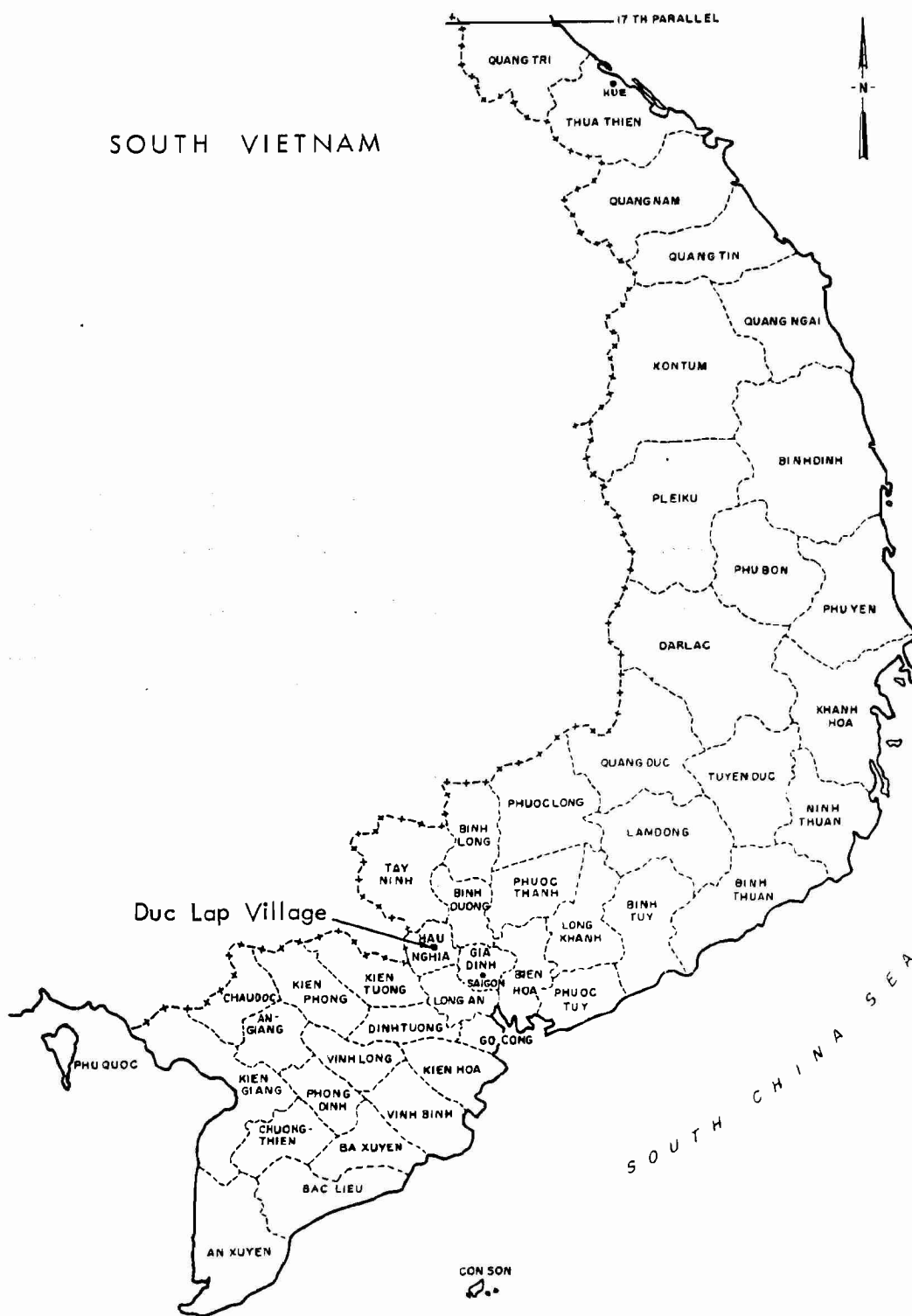
R. Michael Pearce

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**Rand**  
SANTA MONICA, CA. 90406

# SOUTH VIETNAM



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FOREWORD

This report is one of a series of Rand studies that examine the organization, operations, motivation, and morale of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces that fought in South Vietnam.

Between August 1964 and December 1968 The Rand Corporation conducted approximately 2400 interviews with Vietnamese who were familiar with the activities of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army. Reports of those interviews, totaling some 62,000 pages, were reviewed and released to the public in June 1972. They can be obtained from the National Technical Information Service of the Department of Commerce.

The release of the interviews has made possible the declassification and release of some of the classified Rand reports derived from them. To remain consistent with the policy followed in reviewing the interviews, information that could lead to the identification of individual interviewees was deleted, along with a few specific references to sources that remain classified. In most cases, it was necessary to drop or to change only a word or two, and in some cases, a footnote. The meaning of a sentence or the intent of the author was not altered.

The reports contain information and interpretations relating to issues that are still being debated. It should be pointed out that there was substantive disagreement among the Rand researchers involved in Vietnam research at the time, and contrary points of view with totally different implications for U.S. operations can be found in the reports. This internal debate mirrored the debate that was then current throughout the nation.

A complete list of the Rand reports that have been released to the public is contained in the bibliography that follows.

(CRC, BJ: May 1975)

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For a description of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project and interviewing process, the reader should first consult W. Phillips Davison, *User's Guide to the Rand Interviews in Vietnam*, R-1024-ARPA, March 1972.

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## PREFACE

This second Memorandum in the series of three on the evolution of a Vietnamese village deals with the history of Duc Lap village from the close of World War II to the start of the current pacification program in April 1964. This Memorandum describes in detail the background of the problems of the past which are being faced in Duc Lap today.

During the writing of the first Memorandum (RM-4552-ARPA, Evolution of a Vietnamese Village--Part I: The Present, After Eight Months of Pacification, April 1965), the author conducted over 50 intensive interviews, designed to cover the widest possible range of villagers capable of describing the activities in Duc Lap. Much of the information given by the villagers could also be collated with personal observation of the situation in Duc Lap.

In reconstructing the events of the more distant past, the primary problem was that of locating long-term residents of the village. Many people had moved away during the eleven years since the Geneva Agreements, and some of those remaining in Duc Lap were reluctant to discuss the past. This lowered considerably the number of persons in the village available for interviewing. Only by lengthy and often repeated interviews with selected villagers was the history of Duc Lap and the evolution of the current Viet Cong insurgency in the village revealed.

In the course of the interviews many personal questions were asked. Some were answered, some were not. Both the author and his research assistant, Mr. Nguyen Quang Minh, were aware of the evasiveness of some of the answers given to the more direct or intimate questions. Often the informant would answer each inquiry with the perfunctory acknowledgment, "da," neither confirming, denying, nor amplifying on the questions asked.

This was perhaps the most frustrating aspect of this work. Although the author's personal acquaintance with many of the people of Duc Lap somewhat lessened the fears of some who divulged what may have been personal secrets, other villagers were plainly afraid to discuss the past. The aspect of fear as a part of the villagers' reluctance

to discuss the past was intensified by three recent events in the village by which the Viet Cong demonstrated to the people of Duc Lap their ability to exact violent retribution on anyone in the village. A third Memorandum, on events in Duc Lap since November 1964, will treat these incidents in detail.

Considering the nature of some of the information given by the villagers, the author has necessarily protected those who were willingly interviewed by not identifying them. Hopefully, the reader will overlook the seemingly monotonous practice of anonymity whenever specific conversations are attributed to individuals in the village.

SUMMARY

The village of Duc Lap has changed much since 1945. At that time the village was composed of 25 hamlets, each with no more than half a dozen houses, spread over a large area; today the village population is clustered into six well-defined hamlets, each with its barbed-wire perimeter fence. In 1945 there was no road running through the village to Cu Chi as there is today, and Duc Lap existed in semi-isolation from the rest of Duc Hoa district and Long An province. Even during the Japanese occupation of Vietnam when an airfield was built eight miles away, the village was rarely visited by foreign troops.

Immediately after the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, Vietnamese resistance forces, led by the communist-backed Viet Minh movement, took over control of the city of Hanoi and announced a free and independent Vietnam. The August Revolution, as that event was to become known, signaled the beginning of the Khang Chien (Resistance War) which ended nine years later with the departure of the French. As word of the August Revolution spread among the people of Vietnam, it intensified a nationalist spirit against foreign domination, which had long been held in check by the French and, more recently, the Japanese. The people of Duc Lap also heard of the events in Hanoi and assumed that their village was now part of an independent Vietnam. Within a year, however, the French returned to Bao Trai, located two miles west of Duc Lap, and a few weeks later French troops were garrisoned in the village at the Ap Chanh (main hamlet) schoolhouse. Soon after the return of the French, a local Viet Minh force fought the small garrison in Duc Lap, but the poorly armed resistance fighters were severely beaten. For the next five years the local Viet Minh fighters were too weak to do much more than harass the stronger French forces in the area around Duc Lap. The defeat of the local Viet Minh force at the schoolhouse was felt by most of the villagers, as they had come to identify themselves with the resistance fighters against the French. Moreover, the French soldiers, mostly legionnaires and colonial troops, took strong measures in dealing with the village population. During the next few years there was considerable looting, raping, and beating by the French soldiers which further turned the villagers against the French.

By 1950 the Viet Minh had increased in strength around the village to the point that the French had to build a small fort in Duc Lap for their protection. Although the Viet Minh grew stronger and bolder in the village, throughout the remainder of the Khang Chien no major fighting took place in Duc Lap. Soon after the news of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu had filtered to Duc Lap, the Khang Chien came to an end with a divided Vietnam. Many of the Viet Minh and their families from around Duc Lap chose to be regrouped to the north, while many of the villagers who had fled during the fighting returned to what was left of their former homes in the village.

The newly born Republic of Vietnam (RVN) had the task of rebuilding the country after the war. Ngo Dinh Diem was chosen as the first president of the Republic. Although Diem was virtually unknown to the people of Duc Lap, it appears that they placed their faith in him to lead them in rebuilding their country and their ravaged village. But as his regime appeared to become more dictatorial his popularity declined.

The successful consolidation of national power and administration by Diem began to conflict sharply with the villagers' traditional autonomy in local affairs. The people of Duc Lap came to feel particular rancor for Diem, as it was believed that he had in 1961 personally appointed the new village chief, to their village. He was the first official appointed to Duc Lap from the Diem regime, and he appeared to be a corrupt and at times cruel administrator who was hated and feared by the villagers.

In addition to their hatred and fear of the village chief, the villagers' increasing loss of faith in Diem made them easy targets for the recruiting drive and propaganda of the newly created National Liberation Front of the South (NLF). The Viet Cong guerillas shrewdly posed as former Viet Minh resistance fighters and drew on the villagers' sympathies for the Khang Chien in order to gain support for their revolution against Diem. To many people of Duc Lap it was the continuation of the August Revolution; only the enemy had changed.

As the Viet Cong made more and more demands on the people and the village chief continued his cruel and corrupt administration of the village, the people of Duc Lap despaired of relief from both evils. In 1961 a group of

Hoa Hao militia was sent to Duc Lap by the Duc Hoa district chief to help maintain security in the village against Viet Cong attacks. Although they had initial difficulty in gaining acceptance in Duc Lap, after they showed the people their determination and spirit the Hoa Hao militia received more support from the villagers. To their credit, the Hoa Hao were instrumental in getting rid of the village chief, who had controlled by village for the past three years, and they thereby gained the everlasting thanks of the villagers.

It was not long after the old village chief's departure in 1963 that the first American advisors appeared in Duc Lap. They had come with an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalion which was to provide security for the building of strategic hamlets and a new road through the village. The Viet Cong claimed that the Americans had come to take the place of the French and told the villagers to resist them. At first, many of the people believed the Viet Cong, but as the other side of the American assistance, USOM aid, was introduced into the village, most of the villagers saw that the Americans had come to help and not control them.

The Strategic Hamlet Program was a failure in Duc Lap primarily because the people did not want to relocate off their lands into crowded hamlets, and second, because they were not certain that the government could provide security for them against Viet Cong attacks. With the fall of Diem in November 1963, what was left of the Strategic Hamlet Program in the village also collapsed. Although the people of Duc Lap approved of the leader of the November 1, 1963, coup which overthrew Diem, General Duong Van Minh, they were skeptical of the man who replaced him after the January 30, 1964, coup, General Nguyen Khanh. In place of strategic hamlets came New Life Hamlets, and under Khanh's new pacification program and its "oil spot" concept the people were promised security and economic aid in return for their support of the government against the Viet Cong. By April 1964, having already witnessed two coups d'etat within three months, the people of Duc Lap were skeptical of the ability of the new government to keep the promises of a more secure and better life that its predecessors could not.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

The government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) is currently fighting against a "revolutionary" war, the social and political aspects of which are deeply rooted in the recent history of the country, and, perhaps more important, in the minds of the Vietnamese people. That this revolution is being supported ideologically and materially by the communist regime of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) cannot be overlooked when trying to understand the nature of the conflict in Vietnam today. In fact, many of the popular doctrines of revolutionary war currently being used by the Viet Cong insurgents in Vietnam today were developed during the French Indochina War when the Vietnamese fought the French for their independence.

According to Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Truong Chinh, and other communist leaders of the successful revolutionary war against the French, support by the people, and the rural population in particular, is a sine qua non for success. In their struggle against the government of the RVN, the present Viet Cong insurgents have not overlooked this important principle of revolutionary warfare and have concentrated on developing a base among the rural dwellers from which information, supplies, and recruits can be drawn. Meanwhile, it appears that the past actions of the various RVN governments, ranging from the defunct Strategic Hamlet Program and New Rural Life hamlets to "oil spot" pacification, have been generally ineffective in gaining the lasting support of the rural population.

In the present revolutionary war in Vietnam, it appears that time and history have been on the side of the Viet Cong--time, in the sense that the Viet Cong have made it abundantly clear that they are willing to fight a protracted war for ten years, or more if necessary, in order to wear down the resistance of the successive RVN governments and their supporters. This does not mean that the Viet Cong might not seize upon what appears to them a favorable situation and attempt to end the war quickly with a military victory. This would be particularly true in the case of the supposed Viet Cong summer offensive of 1965, which did not achieve success because of the large-scale introduction of U.S. combat forces.

In terms of history, to many of the villagers of Vietnam the current conflict is seen not as a communist-inspired insurgency but as the continuation of a revolution which began twenty years ago in which the majority of the rural population gave its support to the revolutionaries. Perhaps it was the thought of this nationalist revolution which is so deeply embedded in the minds of the rural Vietnamese that caused one European observer in Vietnam to remark to an American, "Today you're fighting a hundred years of history."

Those "hundred years of history" actually date back to 1862, when the French gained control over the three eastern provinces of Bien Hoa, Dinh Tuong, and Gia Dinh and established their first colonial foothold in Vietnam. Although it may be placing too much emphasis on the historical implication of the events of 1862, it is quite probable that the seed of rebellion which bloomed first for the Viet Minh and now for the Viet Cong was sown among the rural Vietnamese during the last half of the 19th century.

Although resistance against the French and the Japanese continued sporadically throughout the first four and a half decades of the twentieth century, it was not until the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 that the Vietnamese united in rebellion. Beginning with the August Revolution in 1945 and ending with Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Vietnamese, and especially the rural population of Vietnam, suffered and struggled through nine years of war. In the years following the Geneva Agreements of 1954 it appeared that the last flames of revolution which had reached their peak during the final years of the First Indochina War had died out in the divided country with the departure of the French. Ngo Dinh Diem had been selected as the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, and one of the tasks confronting him upon taking office was to reconstruct and reunite the rural areas of South Vietnam, which had been damaged and divided during the nine-year resistance war against the French.

Initially, Diem appeared to have gained the popular support of the people of Vietnam, but as his regime began to alienate itself from the rural population, the Viet Cong insurgents were trying to revive the revolutionary spirit that had been brought to a fever pitch by the

Viet Minh against the French. The Viet Cong began building up an extensive organization in the rural areas based to a limited degree upon genuine popular feelings against Diem. The Diem regime chose to ignore these stirrings or else ruthlessly suppressed them. The Viet Cong, in turn, reinforced their organization through the use of terror against recalcitrant villagers and low-level government officials. In fact, the Viet Cong began what has been described as "one of the most savagely mounted campaigns of elite demolition ever seen."

With the creation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) of the South in 1960 the insurgency against the U.S.-supported Diem regime became widely known. The Viet Cong guerrillas of the NLF shrewdly, and with expertise developed in the resistance war against the French, played on the nationalist sympathies of the rural population and sent specially selected cadres who were heroes of the resistance into the villages to recruit support for the revolution. Although in 1960 many nationalist Vietnamese felt that the NLF represented a "legitimate" means of opposing Diem, by 1961 the communist government in Hanoi displayed its involvement by announcing a guerrilla offensive in the South.

Thus, by 1961 the situation of the average villager in Vietnam was somewhat ambivalent. Some villagers gave open support to the Viet Cong, while many others secretly sympathized with the insurgents but were reluctant to give them open support for fear of GVN (Government of Vietnam) reprisal. Unlike the resistance war, in which the majority of the rural population supported the Viet Minh, today much of the rural population prefers to remain uncommitted to either side. This portion of the rural population, living in contested areas where neither the Viet Cong nor the GVN has complete control, has been labeled "apathetic" and is the target for Viet Cong pressures for support and simultaneous GVN demands for allegiance.

To the present, the situation of the Vietnamese villagers remains generally unchanged, and only when that large uncommitted part of the rural population gives its support, voluntary or forced, to one side or the other does a conclusion to the current revolutionary war in Vietnam seem possible.

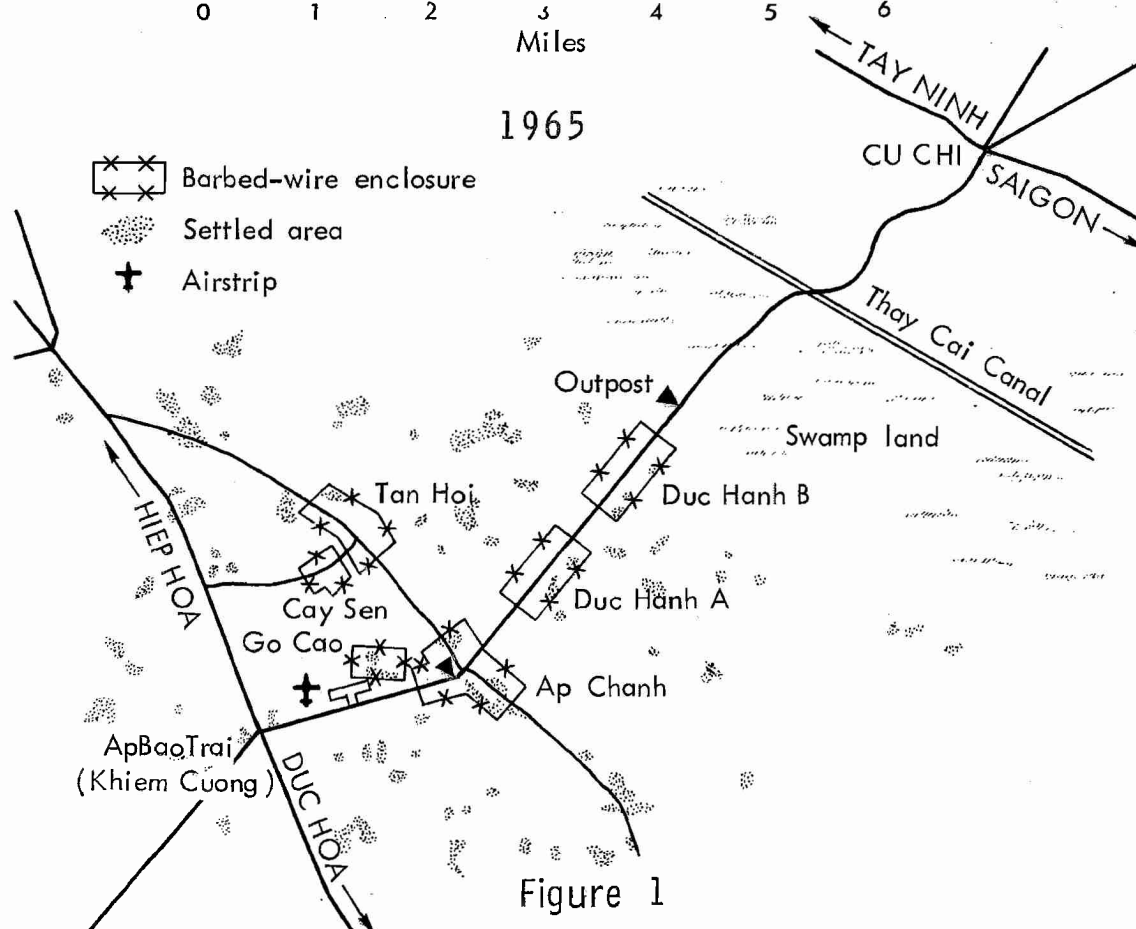
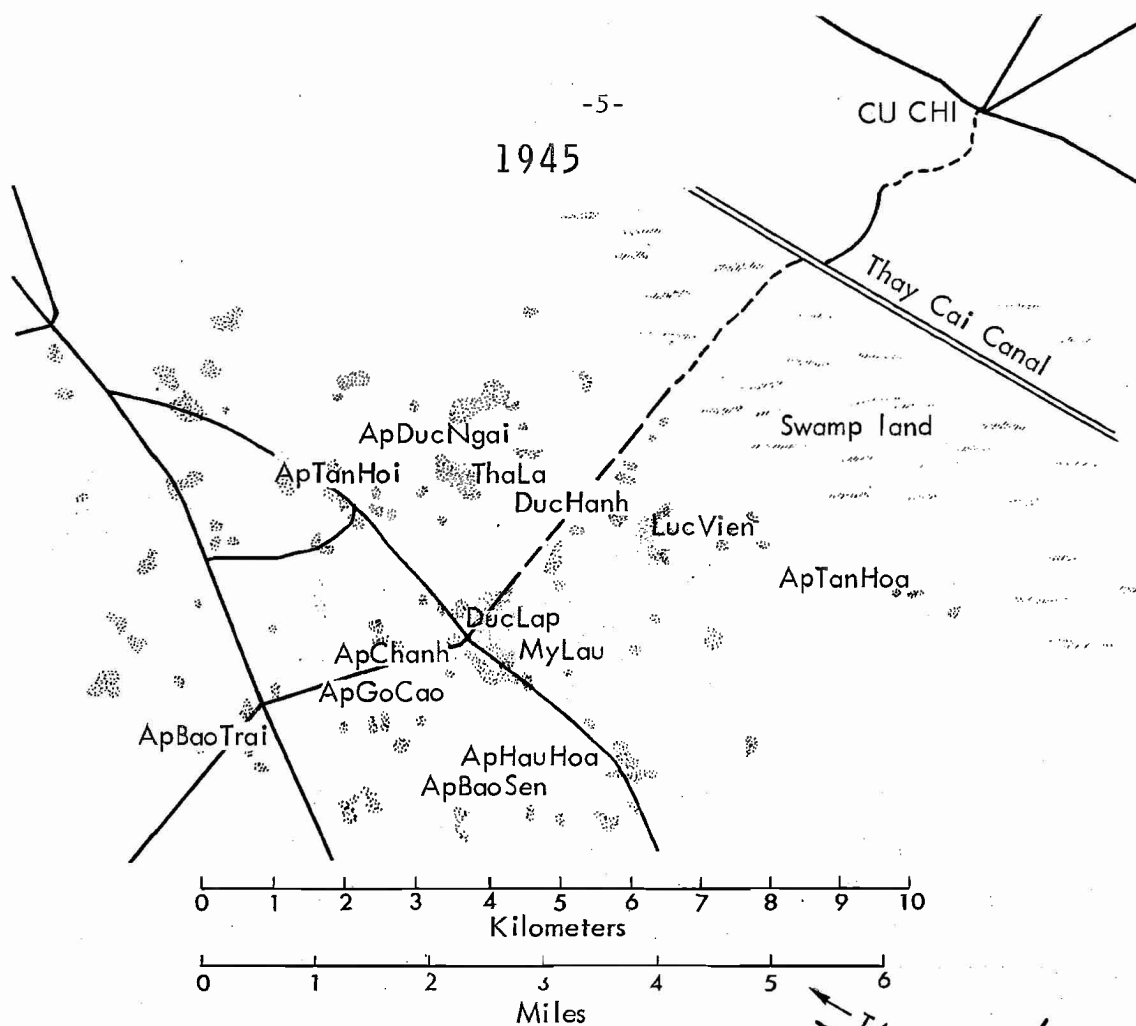
II. KHANG CHIEN (THE RESISTANCE WAR), 1945 - 1954

Duc Lap village in 1945 differed markedly from its present form; rather than being composed of six hamlets, each with a well-defined barbed-wire perimeter, the village comprised about 25 hamlets located over a much larger area (see Fig. 1). Of course, it must be recognized that in 1945 many of those hamlets were nameless and consisted of nothing more than a collection of half a dozen houses. Moreover, most of the houses that were located in the hamlets of Duc Lap had their own surrounding of fruit and shade trees and a nearby plot where the family ancestors were buried--quite unlike the rows of houses in the treeless hamlets of Duc Lap today. Usually, each house was located in the middle of, or very close to, the land that was farmed by the individual families. Because the settlement pattern of Duc Lap was dispersed, Ap Chanh (the main hamlet) was far less crowded than it is today. Although the village administration office was located there, the hamlet was not the general meeting place it is today. One elderly resident of Duc Lap recalls Ap Chanh as having no more than ten houses in 1945; today there are over 200 dwellings in the hamlet.

The dispersed nature of its hamlets and the fact that it was located two miles east of Bao Trai and the main intraprovincial road which ran from the Hiep Hoa sugar mill to the Duc Hoa district town\* added to Duc Lap's semi-isolation from the mainstream of activities in Duc Hoa district. While the Japanese occupied the area surrounding Duc Lap, they built an airfield eight miles west of the village across the Vam Co Dong river and also stationed a military garrison at the Hiep Hoa sugar mill. Although Japanese troops were seen passing through the village on rare occasions, they did not occupy the village.

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\*It will be remembered from RM-4552-1-ARPA that Duc Hoa district was in Long An province until the formation of Hau Nghia province in October 1963. The present road through Duc Lap was not built until 1963, and before that time the main transportation artery in Duc Hoa district was the road from Hiep Hoa to the district town. Today the stretch of that road between Duc Hoa and Bao Trai (the present province capital of Hau Nghia) has been cut and mined in numerous places by the Viet Cong and is therefore impassable.



Because the eight miles to the airfield was a relatively long distance to the villagers, their contact with the Japanese, or any other foreigners for that matter except, of course, the French, was minimal. In fact, when discussing the rare appearance of the Japanese in the village one woman said, "At that time we saw the Japanese come here but it was hard to understand them. We were so afraid to get involved in anything. We heard that there were also Americans, but I did not know what an American looked like." Her husband interrupted and said, "Oh, that was an Englishman and it was during the French time."

Owing to its relative isolation, Duc Lap also had little open contact with the anti-Japanese resistance groups which were springing up throughout Vietnam at that time. Generally, these resistance groups were scattered over large areas with little coordination between them, and therefore they were rather ineffective on a large scale. Open resistance to the Japanese did not occur in Duc Lap.

#### THE AUGUST REVOLUTION: THE STARTING POINT

It was not until the Japanese were defeated in World War II that the Vietnamese people, including the villagers of Duc Lap, were able to attempt to gain independence for Vietnam from foreign domination. During the confusion following the capitulation of the Japanese, some of the better-organized resistance groups, including the communists, made a bold move to seize control of the country. On August 19, 1945, the population of Hanoi rose in revolt, overthrew the remaining Japanese occupation forces, and declared a free and independent Vietnam. The word of the August Revolution, as it became popularly known, spread quickly throughout Vietnam. By August 23, the population of Saigon was in general revolt and even the insulated residents of Duc Lap had received word of the rebellion. The many isolated resistance groups in Vietnam rather haphazardly joined forces under the common banner of the August Revolution and took control of a large part of the rural areas.

The August Revolution signaled the beginning of a struggle that would involve every man, woman, and child in Duc Lap. What was in fact

beginning was the Khang Chien (the Resistance War) which would end the long years of colonial rule after a bitter and bloody nine-year struggle, with the withdrawal of the French and the creation of a partitioned Vietnam.

Some of the older residents of Duc Lap speak with pride about the August Revolution. The great majority of the people of Duc Lap were no doubt sincere nationalists, and most of them seemed unaware of the communist organization behind the August Revolution and the eventual communist control of the Khang Chien.

Concerning their role in the Khang Chien, many of the villagers admitted they had fought the French. But when asked about their individual activities as resistance fighters, they usually demurred further comment or changed the subject. The reluctance of those people in Duc Lap who took part in the Khang Chien to discuss their activities resulted in part from fear of possible GVN reprisal toward former resistance fighters. Apparently, nationalist groups existed in the general area of Duc Lap for several years and had made occasional forays against French forces, but these groups were so weak and unorganized that they were never able to effectively follow up any local success which might have been achieved. A general conclusion regarding the period immediately following the August Revolution is that Duc Lap was under neither Viet Minh nor French control. As the former village police officer, an intermittent resident of Duc Lap since 1935, described the situation then, "The Viet Minh did not control here. We were more or less autonomous. The Viet Minh did stay here a few months, then the French came to occupy Bao Trai. Twenty days later they [the French] occupied here."

#### THE FRENCH RETURN

Apparently, the village did in fact exist "autonomously" for at least part of the period between 1945 and 1947, having little or no contact with the outside world and the political upheaval that was taking place in Saigon and other cities of Vietnam as the French returned to reestablish control. To the people of Duc Lap, the return of French control to the rural areas meant the loss of their newly acquired autonomy and a return to their former standard of living, described by one

man as "...the French time when we did not have much money. The labor wage was only 10 piasters per day...oh, only 10 piasters, the people were so poor..."

Another villager was extremely bitter when he recalled the return of the French to the village in 1945: "...from 1945 to 46 the Viet Minh took over the government and the French withdrew from Vietnam [sic]. But it was not long before the French came back. At that time the French were very cruel; they almost destroyed us in the fight against the Viet Minh. We did not see any Viet Minh; all we saw was the terrorism of the French. Some people joined the French because they were afraid, some joined the Cao Dai forces and left their homes here. Everyone was afraid they would get shot. At that time the French shot at anyone they saw around here."

It will be noted that he described the battle between the returning French and the local Viet Minh forces as "the fight." To all the people living in Duc Lap village at that time, and particularly in Ap Chanh, that battle had particular significance. An elderly resident of Ap Chanh vividly recalled the event:

Q: When did the Viet Minh rise up?

A: It was Vietnamese March;\* the Viet Minh rose up and fought the French right at the very place of the schoolhouse. They fought each other the whole night. The Viet Minh came into the village and hid behind the gravestones around the post. The French shot machine guns and killed about 11 or 12 people.

Q: The French had a post at the school at that time?

A: The French occupied the school and made it their post. It was not a post or stronghold itself.

Q: How many soldiers were in the school then?

A: Well, there were about nine of them.

Q: Nine? Were there any Vietnamese with them?

A: There were some interpreters. It seemed to me they [the French] were legionnaires.

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\* He is referring to the third lunar month, which corresponds with May 1947 of the Western calendar.



A: (His wife) Yes, they were. There were black soldiers too; the soldiers who raped anybody they met.

Although the above description sounds like a minor skirmish, after their initial defeat by the French at the schoolhouse in Ap Chanh, the poorly armed Viet Minh around Duc Lap apparently went into hiding and avoided open battles, relying on sabotage and ambush to harass the French forces. An example of the Viet Minh guerrilla tactics was given by one villager who was asked how they fought in those early days of the Khang Chien. He replied, "By night, of course. They dared not fight during the daytime. At this place there were not very many Viet Minh. Other rural areas had one platoon for each village. Here the most was a squad that was armed. The rest were barehanded." Another villager recalled that "They [the Viet Minh] fought the same way they [the Viet Cong] do now; they hid in the bushes and trees. They ambushed the French." It was to be a long time before the Viet Minh in the area around Duc Lap would have the ability to make coordinated attacks against the French or attempt to hold any villages or hamlets against French occupation.

By the time of the French return, the Viet Minh had already identified themselves with the people, and their defeat at the schoolhouse was in a sense a defeat for all the villagers of Duc Lap. The villagers' sympathy for the Viet Minh was expressed by an old woman who said, "They were dressed in our clothing. They wore black clothing and did not have any soldiers' dress. They had nothing else. When we saw them at that time we felt so sorry for them. At that time, you must pardon what I say, they were only Thanh Nien Tien Phong."<sup>\*</sup>

When asked if any of the dead Vietnamese were from Duc Lap itself, one man answered, "Who dared to see them and know? We just knew that they were killed. I was taking my children to another place and I heard

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\* During the Khang Chien several organizations were created so as to include all the people in the fight against the French. Apparently some of these organizations were based upon age groups which served the purpose of training future guerrillas. For instance, below the Viet Minh guerrillas there were the Thanh Nien Tien Phong (Pioneer Youth) and the Thieu Nien Tien Phong (Pioneer Children). The tasks assigned to members of these groups varied from carrying messages to intelligence collection and in some cases actual combat.

others telling me, 'My goodness, more than 10 Viet Minh were killed at the graveyard.' We could only talk about it, but we did not dare go and see. How did we know what the French might think if they saw us?"

Other interviews in the village seemed to indicate that the Thanh Nien Tien Phong killed at the schoolhouse were from Duc Lap. One villager said, "The Thanh Nien Tien Phong was founded [in Duc Lap] by Mr. Nguyen An Ninh. All the people in the movement during this time are dead; none of them is living now." Estimates by the villagers of the total number of Thanh Nien Tien Phong in Duc Lap during the Khang Chien ranged from 70 to 100. Many villagers recall that most of the Thanh Nien Tien Phong who fought against the French were armed only with sharpened bamboo sticks.

It was noted during the interviewing about the French occupation of the village that many people recalled that particular period with repugnance. The conduct of the French soldiers with the village population appears to have been extremely harsh, and the occupation of Duc Lap was marked by numerous incidents of raping, looting, and killing. It also appears from the interviews that the French garrison which took over the schoolhouse was composed of Foreign Legion troops who were occasionally augmented by Moroccan or other African colonial troops, thus accounting for the "black soldiers" mentioned above.

As an example of the cruelty of the returning troops to the village population, an elderly woman from the hamlet of Tha La<sup>\*</sup> recalled one incident between her granddaughter and a French legionnaire: "I had a granddaughter; she was raped. She was pregnant yet he still raped her. She did not want to let him rape her so he hit her until her cheeks were swollen. They [the French] and the Cambodian soldiers<sup>\*\*</sup> went on an

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<sup>\*</sup>Tha La formerly belonged to Duc Lap village at the time when the village was much larger than it is today. When the hamlets of Duc Hanh A and B were built, Tha La was excluded, although it is located only 600 meters from the road. It is interesting to note that at the present time most of the Viet Cong harassing fire which is directed at Duc Hanh A comes from Tha La.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Duc Lap is located approximately ten miles from the Cambodian border, and apparently Cambodian soldiers were used by the French to assist in fighting the Viet Minh in the area around the Plain of Reeds.

operation to Tha La and they captured girls and middle-aged women and took them to the tobacco bushes and raped them there."

Another elderly village resident, who also lived in Duc Lap at the time of the French return, was a village notable under the former traditional system, and many people would come and seek his advice about matters in the village. At the time of the French occupation of the village, several women came to him and he recalled them asking, "'Brother, you must find some way to tell them to stop; otherwise, they would rape us to death.' Thinking of that, I could not but laugh to myself. I told them [the women], 'I can't do anything, it's your business, you go around so they rape you.' They [the French] took so many brass things such as pans, trays, and they asked my granddaughters to carry them on their head to their post. I asked them to let me do that instead of the girls as I was afraid the girls would go to the French post, be raped, and not come back. They robbed many things from the villagers and forced the owners to carry them to the post for them. I did not allow my girls to carry for them, they might rape them suddenly. I said, 'They are young and are taking a meal, let me carry those things.' There were five big round brass trays to be put on my head. They were very heavy. At that time it was very miserable. They did not respect old or young people, men or women."

Apparently, during the next few years following their return to Duc Lap the French conducted many military sweeping operations in the area, trying to destroy the elusive Viet Minh guerrillas. As a result of these tactics, the people, who provided the eyes, ears, and often supplies to the Viet Minh, suffered greatly at the hands of the French. A former resident of Tha La recalled a French military sweep through the hamlet in search of an elusive Viet Minh unit: "The French came here and ruined all my things. They reasoned the Viet Minh were here so they destroyed everything, cut down all the trees and plants to ground level. I ran away due to the war and lived over there for five or six years."

During this period of hide-and-seek between the French forces and the Viet Minh, many villagers tried to avoid getting caught in the middle of the fighting. In the particular case of one resident of Duc Lap,

the following incident may seem humorous today but must have been quite frightening at the time: "I evacuated to Tha La and one day I heard some jeeps, those kind that ran and floated on swamps or rice fields,\* searching about. I was thinking I would not be safe and if the soldiers came they would destroy all the farms, so I left my wife and granddaughter and I ran away. I went to Luc Vien and I happened to meet about 70 or 80 Viet Minh and I said to myself, 'No, I can't stay here. There are many Viet Minh and the French are searching for them and if both sides meet here I will not be able to get away.' So I ran away. But the Viet Minh followed in my direction. So I ran to another place, Can Lot. The Viet Minh also moved to Can Lot. Then I had to run to another place and I said to myself, 'My goodness! Why do these guys follow after me? They give me no place to hide!' But I was all right later."

During the French occupation of the village, many of the people of Duc Lap left their homes to seek refuge elsewhere, often near the Viet Minh bases deep in the Plain of Reeds. Very few people, apparently, moved to French-controlled areas from Duc Lap. One elderly woman recalled, "...that when the French came, the people were so scared they — all ran away, nobody wanted to stay near them." Apparently some people tried to remain in the village by hiding during the day and farming their fields at night. One farmer recalled how many people "escaped and let their fields grow wild. Some tried to harvest their fields at night. We shared the rice with one-third going to the field owner and two-thirds going to the harvester."

One French practice in Duc Lap which alienated the villagers was the increase of the much-hated head tax on each person over 18 years of age. According to one man who had been paying this tax for more than 40 of his 60 years, "During the French time we suffered things like head taxing, imprisonment, etc. If I did not have the money I had to sit in prison. Many people fled from paying this tax. It started at one and

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\* He was probably referring to a Weasel, an amphibious tracked vehicle used by the French, which was a forerunner of the modern M-113 being used in Vietnam today.

a half piasters per head, then went to three, three and a half, and finally to over six piasters."

#### THE VILLAGE IN 1950: THE TURNING POINT

As the Viet Minh became stronger and better organized, they began to move out of their secret bases in the nearby Plain of Reeds to harass French traffic along the provincial roads around Duc Lap more frequently. In an effort to consolidate their position in Duc Lap, the French decided to build a permanent outpost in the village. One of the laborers recruited for the construction of the post recalled, "I came here in 1950. I had worked for the French for a year constructing the Tra-cu post and then this post in Duc Lap. This one was occupied by the black French soldiers."

The French attempted to maintain control in the village by stationing soldiers in the newly completed post, but their main effort was in Bao Trai and along the vital Duc Hoa - Hiep Hoa road. A company of 120 French soldiers was permanently garrisoned in Bao Trai, while the Duc Lap post was manned by a mixture of legionnaires, Cao Dai, and an occasional Vietnamese Nationalist Army unit.

To bolster their control in the Duc Lap area the French brought a small contingent of Cao Dai soldiers to the village. The Cao Dai is a religious sect whose main center of influence is in Tay Ninh province which is just north of Duc Lap. The Cao Daists declared themselves nationalists and formed a temporary alliance with the French during the Khang Chien to fight the Viet Minh. During their stay in Duc Lap the Cao Dai soldiers lived in houses across the road from the French outpost. Long before the end of the Khang Chien the Cao Dai soldiers left the village, presumably to return to Tay Ninh. Today there are few Cao Dai religious followers left in Duc Lap.

To many of the villagers the building of the outpost, the increase of French troops, and the introduction of Cao Dai soldiers into the village appeared to indicate that the French were cognizant of the growing strength of the Viet Minh in the area around Duc Lap. While most of the people in Duc Lap today conceal their elation at the Viet Minh buildup against the French for fear they might be misconstrued as communist

sympathizers, they do not hide the fact that to them 1950 appeared as a turning point of the war in the village. One man remembered that "...after 1950 the Viet Minh began to have much ammunition. Before 1950 they didn't have very much. There was much fighting then [after 1950]. I should say that the Nationalist Army was very small so the Viet Minh carried guns and went openly on the road in the daytime."

As previously mentioned, the village population declined when the French returned, and after 1950 when the outpost was built in Ap Chanh only a few families remained. The only reason they remained, according to one villager, was because "they were pro-French. They stayed here to make money by trading with the French. A score of other families were scattered around the village, but not very close to here [Ap Chanh]." While this man's opinion may be in part true, other families remained simply because they had nowhere else to go. Rather than leave their ancestral homes, they chose to stay and endure the control of the French.

One of those who chose to remain in Duc Lap was a former village notable who was respected by the villagers. He described an incident of misconduct by the French soldiers in the village. According to him, it happened "...during the year of the Dragon [1951] which had a big storm. I went to Den Den where I had left my horse to see if it was dead or alive. I had asked somebody to take care of it for me. I dared not leave it here. As I was returning home I was carrying an umbrella with me when I met them [French soldiers]. I bowed down with my two hands in front, of course, but I was unable to remove my head cloth. They accused me of not removing my head cloth and they kicked me twice with heavy kicks. They were kicking me and pointing at the cloth on my head. They asked me why I didn't take it off. I told them my hands were holding the umbrella and I had no hand to remove the cloth." What made this incident particularly repugnant to the Vietnamese peasants was the deliberate disrespect shown by the two soldiers to a village elder.

#### THE DEPARTURE OF THE FRENCH

As the French position in Indochina became more and more uncertain, most observers thought the Khang Chien would end in negotiation, but

few dreamed it would end soon after a military defeat inflicted upon the French forces at a remote district town in the mountains of the north--Dien Bien Phu.

There is no doubt that the people of Duc Lap were happy that the war was finally going to end. The thoughts of peace and returning to their homes after nine years of war and suffering were undoubtedly foremost in the villagers' minds, and the withdrawal of the French was merely an anticlimax. In fact, the first indication some of the villagers received of the end of the Khang Chien was when the French troops left the village. The actual withdrawal of the French remaining in Duc Lap in July 1954 was an orderly affair. One man remembered that during the withdrawal the Viet Minh forces came into the village at the same time: "The French stayed on this side of the road and the Viet Minh stationed themselves on the other side. They faced each other, looking at one another, and minded their own business without talking. There was no trouble between them at all."

One villager was a bit exuberant as he recalled the final days of the Khang Chien; he remarked, "We were glad to be able to drive them out of our country so that no one would step on our country, no one would exploit us. Vietnam was left to us Vietnamese so that we could live peacefully."

The final chapter in the Khang Chien was the regroupment of those Viet Minh who desired or were ordered to go to the North. This particular event in 1954 was vividly recalled by one man who traveled to Bao Trai to watch the regroupment take place:

Q: Were many people from Duc Lap regrouped to the North?

A: Oh yes, quite a few. Many went. Before, many of them hid from the French in the jungle, they were Viet Minh. The resistance fighters were regrouped to the North. Oh my! I went to Bao Trai to see them. There were many of them, it was very crowded. There were women and young girls all dressed in soldiers' uniforms.

Q: They gathered at Bao Trai in order to be sent North?

A: Yes. They were to be sent North. Those of the French follow the French. Those of the Viet Minh follow the Viet Minh. No

one asked anything. Parents who heard that their children were going to the North went to see them and bring them clothing and money. They did not accept the money but took the clothing and cakes and cookies.

Q: Did any of those who were regrouped to the North ever come back?

A: No, not at all, I did not see a single person. I never heard of anybody in this village who said, 'My child or nephew or grandson returns home.'

Q: Was it peaceful after the regroupment?

A: Right. Because they had all gone. No one was left to fight or make trouble. Therefore why not be peaceful? After they had gone for four or five years then the troubles returned.



### III. THE RISE AND DECLINE OF DIEM

The return of peace to Duc Lap after the Geneva Agreements in July 1954 and the following regroupment to North Vietnam also brought the return of many of the villagers who had fled during the war. Many returned to their former homes and farms to find them completely destroyed. One returning villager described how Duc Lap appeared to him upon his return after he had been away for several years: "My goodness, if you stood here on that day and looked around you for over two kilometers and if you saw a house standing you could chop my head off. All the houses were gone. All the buffaloes and cows of this village were gone. Not a single house was left, not a single buffalo remained. After the French left the people were very happy, but there was not a single cow left, so no one could treat his friends to meat."

Other returning villagers had to cut away great amounts of foliage in order to find some recognizable pieces of their former homes; in some cases, during the landowner's absence the unchecked growth of the tropical vegetation had completely covered the former home sites. During the next few years the village residents would be primarily concerned with the rebuilding of Duc Lap, but in addition and perhaps unknowingly, they would be taking part in the rebuilding of a country which had just gained its independence.

It is interesting to note that not one of the villagers interviewed had ever heard of Ngo Dinh Diem before he became president. Nevertheless, it appears that the people of Duc Lap were willing to support the aristocratic nationalist from Central Vietnam. As one villager commented about Diem, "We expected him to do something helpful for us; if he did we would support him until the end."

Although Diem faced what seemed at the time an impossible task, he set about building up the Republic of Vietnam after nine years of the Khang Chien. One of Diem's earliest successes was overcoming the three major dissident elements within the Republic: the Cao Dai, Binh Xuyen, and Hoa Hao armed sects. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao were religious-based groups, while the Binh Xuyen was primarily a gangster and pirate organization which also controlled much of the opium, gambling, and prostitution in Saigon.

After this initial success, one of Diem's concerns was consolidating his position in the rural areas by reorganizing the rural administration. The village administration was gradually reorganized, and Duc Lap along with many other villages of Vietnam felt the result of these changes. The traditional village council was replaced by a government-appointed village committee made up of several members, each with a specific administrative task in the administration of the village. The reorganization of the village administration in Duc Lap was recalled by the village police officer who said that before 1960 "there was a village chief, a finance officer, and a police officer. But in 1960 there was everything: finance officer, economics officer, legal-papers officer, police commissioner, vice-chairman, chairman. Since the term chairman (chu-tich) was changed to representative (dai-dien) the office of vice-representative is not used anymore."

By extending his control right down to the village level, Diem came into direct conflict with one of Vietnam's most popular and historically most rigidly held traditions: "Phep vua thua le lang" (The king's law bows before the village custom). Diem, the king in this case, was attempting to violate this tradition and in so doing was making himself unpopular among the rural population.

Although few Catholics now live in the village, even among the northern refugees who settled there, one of the major points of the villagers' disapproval of Diem was his tendency to favor Vietnamese Catholics. Their sentiments were voiced by one man who said, "People here complained that everything was primarily reserved for the Catholics. They said that the Can Lao<sup>\*</sup> gets everything first. The Can Lao are always treated with favors."

Diem's image among the villagers of Duc Lap appeared to decline after his "Personalism" cult was begun in the village. When asked if the people of Duc Lap were still willing to support Diem at that time,

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\*The Can Lao (Labor) party was a semisecret organization formed and controlled by Diem's brother, Counselor Ngo Dinh Nhu. The Can Lao eventually became virtually a government within a government and effectively controlled most sectors of Vietnamese society.

one villager candidly answered: "No! Imagine that he [Diem] required every house to buy one photo of him and to hang it up in his house as if to worship him. He did it as if he was the father of the people, and each picture cost from 50 to 80 piasters. How much money did they get from all the houses of this village?"

Many of the villagers of Duc Lap felt that the real problem with Diem was not him, but his brother Nhu and his sister-in-law Madame Nhu. One villager bluntly said, "All the corruption and trouble was caused by Madame Nhu. He [Diem] listened to her and collected very heavy taxes from the people. I feel sorry for Mr. Diem, if only he did not listen to his sister-in-law."

The people of Duc Lap felt personal rancor for Madame Nhu, as one man bitterly complained in the following conversation:

Q: Did the people like Diem?

A: No, they didn't, but they did not dare open their mouths to talk, especially when Madame Nhu ran for the National Congress here.

Q: What province?

A: Our province, of course. At that time there was a man who was from here and he ran from this province too; but he could not win because she was so strong. Imagine, soldiers stood inside and outside the voting rooms staring at the people. How did the people dare vote for the other man? The ballots were in two colors. One color for Madame Nhu and one for the other man. Every time someone put his ballot into the box he had to raise his hand so that the others could see that he voted correctly [sic].

The disenchantment in Duc Lap with the Diem regime accelerated in 1961 with the appointment of a new dai-dien xa (village representative) to the village. He was not originally from the village but came from another part of Vietnam to take up the administrative duties in

Duc Lap. The fact that their village chief was not even from the village rankled the people of Duc Lap.\*

What is particularly damaging to the government in the case of an unpopular village official is that he is the closest contact between the government and the people, who are the direct victims of his misdeeds, which are then attributed to the government. In its' new village chief, Duc Lap apparently has a cruel and corrupt administrator who had the complete backing of the province and district chiefs. It was reported that his appointment to the village came directly from Diem's palace in Saigon. This latter point was particularly believed by many villagers, one of whom said, "We know he was Diem's man and that he had strong support from high-ranking officials. He was cruel and caused much suffering for the villagers, but no one dared to open his mouth to criticize him or stop him, and the high authorities did not punish him."

One person in the village had a different idea about the new village chief's appointment to Duc Lap; according to him, "The villagers believed that he was appointed by Madame Nhu and her plot."

Whatever the truth about his appointment to Duc Lap, from some of the accounts of his activities in the village it appears that most of the people living in the village at that time suffered because of him in one form or another. For example, one man who worked as a Self-Defense Corps (SDC) platoon leader under him and knew him as well as anyone gave a rather general account of the village chief's activities in the village; "He was the village chief but he also worked on police and administrative work. We had capable men to do these jobs, but if we wanted to do something he would stop us. He had three wives and looked down on us. With each wife he had two or three children. The wives all worked, but they did not get along together. One lived at the district town, and the other two stayed in the post in Duc Lap. He was very poor at first, but after two years as village chief each of his wives had much gold jewelry because he collected money from the people and did not turn the money over to the district.

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\*This situation would be repeated when the present village chief, also from another part of Vietnam, took over the village administration.

"We had nominated a man for the police official's job, but the village chief stopped the process. And financial work, too; he said that he could not trust anyone, that no one was as good as he, so he did not appoint any of us. Many of us were educated and also had diplomas, but he did not let any of us apply for any of the village jobs. How could we complain to the district chief when he also invited the village chief to be there? We did not dare to; if Lon knew about it he would kill us."

Another villager recalled that it was he who "...abused [misused] the Tet bonus given to us from district, almost 40,000 piasters. That was public money, but he knew the people at district so they gave him the money."

Through his control of the village administration, the new village chief had effectively gained complete control over the residents of Duc Lap. His methods of running the village reminded many villagers of the French times in Duc Lap; only this time the enemy was not a foreigner. The villagers' dislike of him also reflected their feeling toward the Diem regime, which they were convinced had sent the cruel and corrupt administrator to Duc Lap.

At about the same time, the villagers of Duc Lap first heard the name of the Mat Tran Giai Phong Mien Nam (National Liberation Front of the South, or NLF). Although NLF agents and cadre were already busy in Duc Lap and other villages recruiting members, few villagers knew or understood the nature of the organization that was to grow up in their midst. An often overlooked but important fact is that the modest beginning of the NLF could be closely paralleled with the beginning of another struggle which had not yet fully dimmed in the villagers' minds--the Khang Chien.

#### IV. THE RESUMPTION OF THE REVOLUTION

"The main point as I see it is due back to the Khang Chien period. Since the 1945 revolution the people's minds have been somehow impressed by the seed of the Khang Chien. They have great sympathy with that revolution." This answer was given by a teacher in Duc Lap (one of the better-educated men in the village) to the question of why he thought some of the people of the village and other areas supported the present Viet Cong guerrillas. He, as a rural dweller, quickly saw the historical link between the Khang Chien and the situation which was developing in Vietnam in 1960 and 1961. The Viet Cong insurgents of the NLF also tried to impress upon the villagers the relation between their "liberation" and the Khang Chien.

To the people of Duc Lap the resumption of the revolution, or liberation, as it was then called, against the government did not occur overnight but grew up "gradually." As one villager viewed it, "The liberation grew up right from this place [South Vietnam]; it happened gradually. Another generation started the liberation [as opposed to the Khang Chien]. Let's say that I am now 50 years old, those who are 30 are now going [being killed in the war] and those who are 20 come to take their place. The young ones grow up."\*

#### THE VIET CONG APPEAR

The actual appearance of guerrillas, now called "liberation men" or "revolutionaries," in the village in 1960 was an unforgettable day. "That day," recalled one villager, "I was arrested by them when I was cooking. They arrested all the people in this row of houses. We were scared to death because they brought us along with them. I was afraid that the SDC [Self-Defense Corps] might shoot at us because they could

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\*The point this man is trying to make is that in the eyes of the villagers the human resource of revolution never ends. After the revolutionaries grow old or are killed, another generation grows up to take their place.

not tell who was Viet Cong\* and who was villager. They took us to another place for propaganda purposes; they told me not to listen to the Diem government, and they advised me to listen to Sir Ho [Ho Chi Minh]. I told them, 'I don't know, for it is up to the will of heaven. If I do what you say the Diem side will arrest me. And if I say things against you then you might arrest me. So I rather carry both burdens on my two shoulders and stand in the middle and get along with both sides.'"

Judging by this man's testimony, at least some of the villagers of Duc Lap did not appear to welcome the arrival of the Viet Cong revolutionaries of the NLF in the same manner as they did the Viet Minh resistance fighters of the Khang Chien. To overcome this difficulty the Viet Cong chose to infiltrate the village with specially selected political cadre whose job it was to subvert the village to ultimate Viet Cong control. The Viet Cong were especially adept at developing the image of people in the village who had been associated with the Khang Chien and who had now joined them to fight against the government. Some of these local personalities were well known in the village, and the people were being led to believe that the original revolution which started against the French had never really been completed and had only lay dormant for several years after the Geneva Agreements.

This feeling among the people of Duc Lap was expressed by one villager who said, "They think that this is the continuation of the former revolution, and that spirit has been impressed and absorbed in their minds for a long time; but they do not know it has changed its form. They believed in the revolution [Khang Chien], so now they believe in the propaganda that has been based on the former revolution. The people have been impressed with that idea, so now it is hard for them to change

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\*It is doubtful if in 1960 the insurgents were known as Viet Cong. Viet Cong, or VC, which is the name used by the RVN to describe the insurgents, is a pejorative term for Vietnamese Communist. However, this interview took place in 1965, and the name Viet Cong has been in use for several years. To avoid confusion it will appear throughout the rest of this Memorandum.

their way of thinking. They [the resistance fighters] stood up to fight the French and all the people supported them. They continued their work secretly, quietly; the very same resistance fighters now stand on the [Viet Cong] cadre side, so the people can see clearly. They [the people] have had confidence in them for a long time. They have been fighting the French, now they live together with the people. Therefore, it is hard to make the people think differently."

Apparently the Viet Cong armed forces remained outside Duc Lap in a secure area and received information from their cadre in the village. One villager described these cadre as can bo nam vung (sleeper cadre). According to him, "They [the sleeper cadre] report to the Viet Cong right away when there is any trouble, or when the Viet Cong come they are the people who make the contact. They are the ones who report, not the people. There is a small number of Viet Cong who stay all over the village. They live there like common people. It could be that they put one man in this group of houses, one man at another group of 50 houses, or one person in a hamlet. Whenever something unusual occurs they report to the higher ranks."

It also appeared that the Viet Cong attempted to enmesh the people of Duc Lap in their renewed revolution against the government by means of an act of commitment on the part of the individual villager or through exploitation of family relationships between villagers and cadre already fighting with the NLF. As an example of the family relationships which exist in Duc Lap between the villagers and the Viet Cong, among the members of the present village administration, the hamlet chief of Duc Hanh A has a cousin who is a Viet Cong. The Duc Hanh B hamlet chief has a younger brother who is a Viet Cong secret cadre. The finance officer also has a younger brother in the Viet Cong ranks, and the brother of the village police officer is also a Viet Cong. In addition to this group of relatively select individuals who serve in the village administration, it is a well-known "fact" among the villagers that the wife of the village sawmill owner is a hamlet cadre, although she has never been caught in any subversive activities. The list of those in the village who have a relative with the Viet Cong could go on indefinitely.



If those who have a friend, neighbor, or acquaintance who is either a Viet Cong sympathizer or an active member in the NLF are considered, then almost every person in the village would be included.

#### VIET CONG "PRESENCE" IN DUC LAP

Even though the Viet Cong have a wealth of family relationships and contacts to exploit in the village, Duc Lap has never been fully under insurgent control. Rather, the Viet Cong have managed to thoroughly infiltrate the village and have created a "presence" within the village. "Presence" is substituted here for the more popularly known term "infrastructure," which is often used to describe the nature of the Viet Cong organization in the villages of Vietnam. "Infrastructure" connotes a rigid organization, which the Viet Cong never have had in Duc Lap, whereas "presence" best describes the subtle nature of the Viet Cong influence in the village. In addition, "presence" is much easier to maintain in the village than a clandestine organization which runs the risk of discovery and destruction by the government. Each villager feels the "presence" of the Viet Cong in and around Duc Lap whenever a sniper fires into the village, taxes are collected, or a midnight kidnapping takes place. Another Viet Cong method of maintaining "presence" in Duc Lap is through widespread dissemination of propaganda leaflets. These leaflets have been picked up on the village roads, in the fields, and even in front of villagers' houses. Moreover, the Viet Cong "presence" is maintained psychologically in the sense that the individual villagers are constantly reminded in their thoughts of a relative, friend, or neighbor who is a Viet Cong. Occasionally, this "presence" is reinforced by Viet Cong armed penetrations into the village for propaganda or terror purposes.

One of the New Rural Life cadre assigned in the village explained why his job of discovering the nature of the Viet Cong influence in the village was so difficult: "As I know right now, the Viet Cong even come into this hamlet and go to the remote houses and softly whisper many things into the people's ears. Yet, the people are afraid and never dare to report this to the GVN. They only dare inform about the arrival of Viet Cong to very close friends or Viet Cong cadre."

The present dai-dien is well aware of the Viet Cong "presence" in Duc Lap. According to him, "...a large number of people sympathize with the Viet Cong. Therefore, what I now see is that the giac [rebels] are among the people. These people have been close to the Viet Cong for a long, long time. Therefore, they are ten times more afraid of the Viet Cong than of the government authorities. It is very possible that 90 percent of the people here are Viet Cong."\*

Although the village chief's estimate may be too subjective, there is no doubt of the pervasive influence of the Viet Cong in Duc Lap. The former village police officer recounted an experience which points out the extent of the Viet Cong "presence." "One morning my wife had to go to Duc Hoa for a [Viet Cong] demonstration. They told the people to go and if someone does not they will have agents in every place who will come and get them at night and take them away. Then they will force those people to pound rice or watch chickens or do something else for them. They will keep them there for a few months before they release them. Who dares to disobey them?"

The irony of this incident was discovered later when it was learned that the demonstrators who had been sent by the Viet Cong were caught and punished by the GVN authorities. According to the same man whose wife had taken part in the demonstration, "The authorities arrested them. They were all women and girls. They were afraid so they had to go. They were punished by shouting, 'Down with Ho Chi Minh. Welcome the government of the Republic of Vietnam.' They had to shout while standing in the sun."

As the Viet Cong grew stronger around the village and the GVN tried to counteract the threat, the burdens on the individual villagers became heavier. What made it particularly difficult for the peasants to refuse support for the Viet Cong, disallowing the use of terror, was the "correct" approach to the people used by the insurgent agents. The Viet

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\* In a previous interview in September 1964 this same man estimated that "70 percent of the village population are Viet Minh sympathizers" (although not all these are necessarily Viet Cong). In January 1965 he gave the above figure, which may account in part for the present deteriorating situation in the village and an increase in sympathy with the Viet Cong among the villagers.

Cong agents knew how to talk to the people in their own language and in a persuasive yet not forceful manner. In contrast, the direct, often impersonal methods used by government representatives have generally appeared to alienate the rural population rather than gain their support.

#### VIET CONG APPROACHES TO VILLAGERS

As might be expected, many of the villagers were reluctant to talk about the methods used by the Viet Cong agents in the village in approaching them for support. Fortunately, however, there was a person in the village who could travel freely in and out of the Viet Cong territory and who was willing to tell of her experiences. This unusual source of information was a woman Oriental doctor, who is well known not only in Duc Lap but also in the surrounding villages because she can cure the tri (hemorrhoid) disease which afflicts many rural Vietnamese. According to her, the Viet Cong "...convince sweetly, they let us drink sugar water first, then after we have told all we know they let us drink salty water. I'll tell you something, the last time I went there [the Viet Cong zone] they interrogated me by trying to make friends with me and ask questions. From time to time they sent women to make friends with me. In the afternoon a lady came and held my hands and tapped my shoulder trying to make friends with me. She would ask, 'Where are you from? Do you come here to work? My goodness, you treat sickness very skillfully. I've heard that you are very good. Where are you from?' They asked me for two or three nights. When our government official comes to ask questions he does not ask like the Viet Cong; he would just go directly to the subject and ask the questions freshly [with impertinence]. Even if he meets someone who hates the Viet Cong, the people would be disgusted by his [government official's] behavior."

Although the doctor displayed fortitude by describing her visits into the Viet Cong zones, during the above conversation she also showed her awareness of the Viet Cong "presence" in the village and the possible consequences of talking to an American. In the middle of a sentence, just as two people passed in front of her office, she suddenly said, "I

must speak softly or else these people [Viet Cong] will cut my head off if they hear this!"

The Viet Cong "sugar water...salt water" approach to the villagers is reminiscent of another old saw, about the carrot and the stick. When the persuasive "carrot" of personal sympathies toward the Khang Chien or family relationships which the Viet Cong dangle very skillfully in front of the people does not gain their support, then they must resort to the pressure of the "stick." In most cases in Duc Lap, the "stick" was terror in the form of kidnappings or murder threats. The actual number of Viet Cong kidnappings in the village will probably never be known, as many people are simply too frightened to talk about them. A few people, however, showed courage when they recalled their experiences with the Viet Cong. Hamlet chiefs are a particularly choice target for Viet Cong terror, as the chiefs of three of the four hamlets in Duc Lap have been kidnapped. Although the hamlet chief at Go Cao hamlet has not yet been kidnapped, his predecessor was captured by the Viet Cong. When asked who this man was he answered, "A man over there, he was hamlet chief for 10 days. The Viet Cong captured him and he was afraid so he asked to resign. Since I took the job there have been military people here to protect me. They [Viet Cong] came twice. Once two of them came to my house and asked how much my salary was. I told them that I did not receive any salary and they asked why I worked without salary for the national government. I said I am only helping the people of the hamlet. They asked whether the government soldiers had done anything bad to the people. They said for me to tell the truth and they would stop those soldiers and beat them. Another time they came to distribute leaflets, but I did not know about it."

Another hamlet chief, from the area known as Duc Hanh A, described his kidnapping by the Viet Cong: "My eyes were blindfolded after they captured me and when they took it off I could only see trees and bushes. I had to walk very far and they gave me two meals on the way. They told me to resign as hamlet chief, and if I returned to the job after they released me they would come back to the hamlet and cut my head off."

Decapitation seems to be one of the favorite Viet Cong threats against the villagers, as another man who had been captured by the Viet Cong recalled in the following conversation:

Q: Were you at any time captured by the Viet Cong?

A: Yes.

Q: Where was it, in this village?

A: Yes, but I do not know where. They blindfolded me and took me all around.

Q: Did they keep you long?

A: A day and a night.

Q: Why did they capture you?

A: I was just discharged from the army and I was coming back here. They tried to convince me to stay out of my job.

Q: But at that time you did not work for anybody, did you?

A: No, but they thought I was a secret agent.

Q: Did they torture you?

A: No, they only tried to indoctrinate me. They threatened that they would chop off my head.

Another reason why the Viet Cong "burden" has been heavy upon the villagers' shoulders is the continual demand for support in the form of food and taxes. At first many of the villagers appeared to be willing to give whatever they could to the Viet Cong. One man said, "We know their revolution and we must support it, but how can we? In what way? If we love our country what can we do? We cannot hold guns and shoot like they do, we cannot leave our families to go and work for them. So we must take our money and give it to them."

As the Viet Cong organization grew, it needed more money for its support, and the people from the areas around Duc Lap were forced to contribute more and more to the insurgents. As one villager who formerly lived in the Viet Cong zone recalled, "I had to pay them tax of over a thousand piasters for my house. They don't call it tax but call it a contribution."

It should not be too difficult to imagine the position in which the average villager in Duc Lap found himself in 1961. He had been approached by the Viet Cong and asked "to help the revolution," and the government was also trying to gain his support against the insurgents. Although they were living in the midst of a war, the people of

Duc Lap tried to adjust to the Viet Cong "presence" in their village and the infrequent government military sweep through their area and live their normal lives. Regarding the situation in Duc Lap at that time, the village school teacher recalled, "...when the Viet Cong rose up, the guns shot too much and the people dared not walk on the road, but the pupils still came to school to study. There was not a day that we didn't hear a shot or an explosion. They did not attack the post but only shot at it once in a while, and from inside the post they shot out. It was dangerous for the pupils to go to school; they could have been killed. You could say that they dared to pay for their education with their blood and bones, because when the children walked around this place the soldiers in the post could kill them. They shot when they saw shadows, and because the guerrillas hid around here to shoot, the soldiers were unable to tell the difference between guerrillas and pupils at a far distance. There were times when I had to teach school when the bombs and shells flew around the school. I stood and taught when a big cannon shell shot from Duc Hoa landed in the back yard of that house. I calmly stood and taught, pretending nothing was going on, so the children would not be afraid. I only told them to lie down on the floor if it seemed too serious."

#### THE VILLAGERS' VIEW OF THE WAR

Although the teacher could describe the ordeal of being caught in the middle of a war, he had failed to explain the confusion most of the villagers felt as to why the war was being fought. Based upon their memories and experiences of the Khang Chien, they could reasonably understand the Viet Cong position in the war. But the government propaganda, when it did reach the village (which it rarely did), spoke of the "communist threat" and other remote or equally confusing political terms which the average villager could not even begin to comprehend. One of the more respected and wiser men of Duc Lap summed up the villagers' feelings about the war by saying, "I don't think they know on whom they should put the blame. They only see that this war is miserable; struggles and fights between the two sides. They never put into

their minds either nationalism or revolution, and they do not see that this form of government behaves this way or that philosophy behaves in another way. They only say that it is due to the war. They don't look at it from the point of view of any 'ism.' Because the fact is in the South they [Viet Cong] have not touched at all on communism. That way has not been practiced in this part of Vietnam. Therefore, the people have not seen much of its cruelty, its brutality. They may perform communism or something else somewhere outside [North Vietnam], but at the time of the Khang Chien they did not practice the communist way, such as confiscation or other strong measures.

"As I see it, most of those who are over 30 years of age and do their own thinking do not sympathize with communism. Only those who are young and immature are enthusiastic, they have the desire to fight, to hold arms, to kill the enemy. But they are deceived by propaganda. They [Viet Cong] use words to persuade the young people. Especially those whose age ranges from 15, 16 up. At this age they are easily influenced. But as for the mature people, it is not so easy to influence them. If the Liberation people tell them to join the Front, they would just say yes but actually not do anything."

Although the average villager in Duc Lap could not have been expected to fully comprehend the complex political issues put forth by both sides in the war, he did understand that not only did the Viet Cong present a real threat to him and his life if he did not cooperate with them, but also another threat existed within his own village--dai-dien. While the villagers may not have wanted to support the Viet Cong voluntarily, the village chief presented the greater of the two evils, especially as he was the appointed head of their village and therefore had the support of the government. An example of the threat that he posed to the villagers was related by a man who had worked in his administration: "I also worked for him, but I did not know until he told me that he was very cruel. He told me how he had killed one man, and his family never did find out. He invited this man to his place. At that time people were very afraid when the village chief called them. He treated this man to food and drink and then told him to go home. A few days later

he again invited this man to eat and drink beer, then told him to go home. Then when he turned his back, Mr. Lon told the villagers that this man was his spy, his confidential intelligence agent. The Viet Cong heard this, not knowing the man was innocent. Because they saw him eating with the chief and the chief paid him and the village chief said he loved him very much and because he reports to him when the Viet Cong are coming, the Viet Cong chopped his head off."

Pressured from the outside by the Viet Cong and squeezed from the inside by Lon, the people of Duc Lap were almost totally disillusioned with both sides in the war. It was during this nadir in the village that help for the villagers against both problems was to come from an unexpected quarter.



V. THE HOA HAO COME TO DUC LAP

THE SITUATION IN 1961

By 1961 the security situation in Duc Lap had deteriorated to the point where the Viet Cong were able to make daylight intrusions into the village without fear of resistance from the SDC, who would merely retreat into the post in Ap Chanh and wait until the danger had passed. Diem's appointed village chief was still in charge of the village, but even he was sometimes afraid to go out without an escort. In order to bolster the crumbling SDC in the village, the Duc Hoa district chief decided to send some Hoa Hao militia to Duc Lap. The Hoa Hao is a political-religious sect of about two million members, spread mainly throughout the western provinces of the Mekong delta. Because the sect founder, Huynh Phu So, was killed by the communist Viet Minh in 1947, the Hoa Hao have since then been dedicated anticommunists and have gained a reputation as good fighters.

The Hoa Hao militia that came to Duc Lap is one of many such groups that have come from the western provinces of the Mekong delta to other areas to fight the Viet Cong. These groups could be considered a type of mercenaries who fight for a small salary, and many of them were fighters in the former Hoa Hao army which at various times fought the French, the Japanese, and the Diem regime.

The present Hoa Hao platoon commander explained how he and the others came to Duc Lap: 'We accepted the job in 1961, at a time when there was no security in Duc Lap village. The district chief, Major Van, asked us. In the first group there were nine people. We realized that it was hard to guard the post with only nine men because we only had three men for each of the three sides of the post and there was no one to replace us. The district chief recognized our good work, so he gave me a few thousand piasters to go to An Giang province to recruit more people until we had 25 working here. We did not have very good weapons. The people informed us that we killed around 10 of them [Viet Cong], but we could not seize their weapons because they fought a guerrilla war. If one of them died, then two others risked their

lives to come and get the weapon. At that time we did not have much ammunition, so we could not shoot them when they came to get the weapon. If only we had plenty of ammunition like now!"

When asked about the Viet Cong strength when he first came to Duc Lap, the platoon commander answered, "At that time there were many VC, but their weapons were poor and scarce. A squad of five to seven men had only two or three weapons. Before, they used to shoot at my post, and by hearing those single shots we could tell what kind of old rifle they were using. The kind that shoots one shot at a time. Now their weapons seem good. When they attack our post they shoot much more, just like us. They even fire 20 or 30 bullets continuously. They also have machine guns, as we do."

Apparently, the coming of the Hoa Hao fighters gave some of the people of Duc Lap hope for resisting the Viet Cong, and a few villagers from Ap Chanh began to lend whatever support they could. The Hoa Hao commander remembered the assistance given by one villager: "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ helped us a lot with rice, when we could not get to Bao Trai to buy food. He also lent us money, even by the thousands. He loved us, pitied us, because we had to lead a hard life in the post and the Viet Cong were always attacking us. Although he helped us he was very afraid to let the Viet Cong know about it as they might come and kill him if they knew he was good to us. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ were very good to us and always willing to help us when we got sick or whenever we needed them."

The people of Duc Lap appear to have been aware of what the Hoa Hao militia were doing in the village, and one man, in what must have seemed to him a generous compliment, stated, "They [the Hoa Hao] aren't too sociable, but that doesn't matter because we aren't like that here. If they don't want to work they stop; they are stubborn, but it's good that they quarrel only among themselves and there has been no robbery since they have come here. They don't steal chickens or ducks from the people. They do nothing but work." A woman also had a comment

regarding the Hoa Hao commander and his men: "He makes his men behave. Once his men came here to disturb us; he really scolded them."

The present dai-dien of Duc Lap was one of the original nine Hoa Hao to come to the village. He originally came to Duc Lap as one of the militia, but, as the platoon commander pointed out, "... the authorities realized that he was pretty old so they made him finance officer. I was a fighter then, and for 15 days the Viet Cong attacked the post without stopping. All the brothers in the post had high morale and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ [the present dai-dien] saw that I was very keen in spirit and that I should not be just a soldier, so he recommended me to the district chief and I was approved as platoon leader. Lon was still village chief at that time and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ had to work under him, but even then the people recognized his talent as an honest and competent administrator."

Regarding the present dai-dien, one villager commented, "As I personally observed, well, he was very hien.\* That is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_." Another man in the village also knew the present dai-dien during those early days of his stay in Duc Lap. He recalled, "I saw that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ had a humane heart. He is a religious man and he knows that he will have to stay here a long time. He is also honest and he does not do anything against the people here. I have to say it true by my conscience because I am not afraid to tell the truth, I did not see him receive any bribes."

While the Hoa Hao were busy with the Viet Cong threat to Duc Lap, Diem's village chief was still active in the village. Apparently the Hoa Hao's limited success against the Viet Cong allowed him greater freedom in the village. When one of the Hoa Hao militia was asked if he thought the village chief had any connections with the Viet Cong because he seemed to be able to move freely in the village, he answered, "I don't know, but he could go anywhere himself and the Viet Cong were always watching us at the post and they would shoot a few bullets at us. He used to go out suddenly and he never let us know in advance where he would go."

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\*Hien is a very difficult word to translate, as there is no direct equivalent in English. It can best be expressed in the following sentence: The Vietnamese peasant is very hien; he is quiet, hard-working, does not ask for anything, and is always peaceful and good-natured.

He used to climb over the fence at night. We closed the gate with three locks, but if he wanted to go out he just climbed the fence. He was smart, so the Viet Cong did not know where he went. At the time the people were complaining because if he wanted a pretty girl he took her. If he saw a pretty girl during the day, then at night he would go to her house and pretend to check her papers."

#### THE DEPARTURE OF LON

The Hoa Hao were not long in Duc Lap before they learned about the village chief's activities. Although they were technically under his command, they operated more or less autonomously, independent of the village administration, since they were armed. Nevertheless, the village chief would occasionally try to interfere in the work of the militia. The Hoa Hao platoon leader, who was at the same time commander of the village post, recounted an incident that would finally rid the village of this man who had caused such anguish for the past two years: "It was very difficult at that time; we had to throw our waste outside the post and it was not as comfortable as it is now. One time, someone moved his bowels inside the post. The village chief told my assistant commander to clean up the waste and throw it outside. This man said, 'God, I am the assistant to the post commander and you ask me to do such a thing? There are many soldiers here, why don't you ask one of them to do it?' The the village chief cursed and said that if he would not do that he would be in trouble. This man was very angry so he took out his gun and shot the village chief. The village chief stepped aside and the bullet hit a cabinet and deflected in the direction of a soldier and hit him in the stomach. He died on the way to the district town. He [the assistant] was brought to court and he has been in Long An jail for two years already."

Apparently there had been previous ill feeling between the post assistant and Lon, and the platoon commander explained that his assistant "...saw the people were being oppressed but he could not say anything because he was only an assistant of the village chief. Like me, I was chief of the post, yet I was many ranks under him. He

used to say bad things about this man in front of the villagers and said that he did not do his duty. We realized the truth after he was almost killed by the assistant. The village chief got so scared that he went away two weeks after that."

Apparently the village chief decided that his life was in danger from both the Viet Cong and the Hoa Hao militia and he abruptly left the village. During the course of interviews on his departure one villager recalled hearing that the cruel village chief was in another part of the Mekong delta, but did not know exactly where.\*

After the village chief's departure, the assistant dai-dien took over control of the village administration. Thus, although they had come to Duc Lap for the primary purpose of securing the village from the Viet Cong, the Hoa Hao militia had almost by accident secured Duc Lap from another enemy. With the departure of the village and the appointment of the assistant to the position of dai-dien xa, the Hoa Hao militia resumed its task of fighting the Viet Cong.

While the villagers of Duc Lap were almost completely absorbed in their own local problems, few of them were aware that Viet Cong strength was increasing throughout Vietnam and that the revolutionary war against the Diem government was rapidly changing character. A new element was being added; Diem, sensing the increasingly precarious position of his government within his own country, had appealed for help, and the government of the United States was answering the call. Soon Duc Lap and many of the villages would once again have foreign soldiers in them. They would not come as colonialists or conquerors, but as advisors to the Vietnamese forces.

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\*An unsuccessful attempt was made by the author to find the village chief in order to determine his point of view regarding his activities in the village. Although the villagers of Duc Lap almost unanimously condemned him as cruel and corrupt, it would seem instructive to ascertain his motives for his actions in the village and to learn if he thought he was right.

## VI. THE AMERICANS ENTER

Shortly after the announcement of the increased American aid to Vietnam, units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) began to operate more actively in the areas around Duc Lap. No Americans had yet appeared on the scene, but the village police officer remembered that, "In 1962 there was still much trouble, but in 1963 the presence of the 7th Division [Vietnamese] brought security to the area."

The first Americans to be seen in Duc Lap came with a 7th Division battalion which had been stationed in Bao Trai. The Hoa Hao platoon commander recalled that the Americans came "...about May 1963. Quite a few of them came; there were about eight or nine of them with the battalion. There were many officers and no one was under the rank of Sergeant First Class."

When asked how his militia felt about seeing Americans, the Hoa Hao leader answered, "Well, when we saw the Americans we had much affection towards them. We liked them. When they saw that we did not have enough supplies they gave us cigarettes and ammunition. They gave us a telephone to contact their battalion, and when we went on combined operations with them the advisors always paid more attention to us than to the battalion. They realized my brothers' force was poor, that we had to shoot one bullet at a time, so they told us to lie behind them when there was firing and told us not to raise up our heads, just to let them take care of everything. Only when there was order could we stand up and walk. They told us to stay behind them, for they loved us very much."

The Hoa Hao leader could not be as certain of the feelings of the Duc Lap villagers about the arrival of the Americans as he could be about those of his fellow militia. When asked if he thought any of the people in the village had the idea that the Americans had come just like the French to lead the ARVN to fight, he was more hesitant in answering: "Well, that I don't know, whether there were any people who thought that way. Well, at first they saw that the Americans only went out fighting. That was in early 1963. They came but did not help us as much as they do now."

Whether or not the people of Duc Lap had the idea that the Americans had come to assume the role of the former French soldiers in the village, the Viet Cong, as might be expected, were quick to make propaganda to that effect. Recalling the Viet Cong propaganda against the Americans, a village school teacher said, "They say the Americans follow on the French heels, to replace the French. They [Viet Cong] fought the French so now they just continue the fight. Yes, fought the French. They are fond of that. So basing on that they persuade the people to oppose the Americans. That's so, the people do not like either side [Viet Cong or government]. But it does no good telling them to oppose the other side [Viet Cong]; they have never opposed communism, they have not even seen it. Now the Americans come so they [Viet Cong] propagandize to oppose the Americans. The people somehow seem to lean toward their [the Viet Cong] side."

An opportunity to further explore the Viet Cong view of the Americans' arrival in Duc Lap was provided when two boys, aged 15 and 16, suspected of being Viet Cong were brought to the post for interrogation. During the course of the interrogation, the author was allowed to ask a few questions:

Q: Have you met any Americans?

A: Yes, I met them often at the [Bao Trai] market. They liked to pat me on the head.\*

Q: Didn't they [Viet Cong] ever tell you the Americans were here to help and advise?

A: No, they didn't.

Q: They [Viet Cong] say the Americans are here to govern, so they [Viet Cong] liberate you?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: As you see it, what can Vietnam give America?

A: I am still young, I don't know that.

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\*Although an accepted Western practice and no doubt well intended, patting a Vietnamese on the head may be taken as a personal insult to the individual's human dignity and may be misconstrued as a slight to his ancestors as well.

Other villagers felt that they saw the reason for the arrival of the Americans more clearly. For instance, a resident of Duc Hanh A said, "We see quite clearly that the Americans are helping us." One man in Ap Chanh volunteered, "Oh we could never get close to the French. But since the American advisors came here I could see they were all kind; they like the people and the children like them too."

#### THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

Apparently the American advisors had accompanied an ARVN battalion that was to provide security for additional ARVN units which later arrived in Duc Lap. The Hoa Hao platoon commander recalled, "Just after the regular force, two companies of ARVN engineers came." Although the residents of Duc Lap were probably unaware of it, they were being directly involved in the results of several decisions that had been made in Saigon. First, the village was going to be reorganized into a series of strategic hamlets as a part of the government program of turning the villages and hamlets of Vietnam into centers of resistance against the Viet Cong. The whole pattern of the village was to undergo a drastic change. People were relocated from their homes in the surrounding areas to the newly created hamlets of Duc Hanh A and B. Prior to the Strategic Hamlet Program there were only four or five houses in each of these hamlets; after the program was completed, Duc Hanh A and B would each have over 200 houses. Barbed-wire fences were put up around the perimeters of these new hamlets, and the movements of the villagers were checked very closely.

Considering the dispersed nature of the settlement pattern of Duc Lap, a great deal of relocation of the village population into the strategic hamlets had to take place. Some of the more recalcitrant villagers had to be moved either forcibly or through threats which certainly did not improve the government's image in their eyes. The Hoa Hao commander and his militia were called to assist in moving the people into the hamlets, and he recalled, "The fence was built in 1963 and before that the people stayed in their own house and land and there was no fencing anywhere. The people did not want to move inside, but



thanks to coordination with us going and collecting all the ID cards of the people outside, then promising to return the ID cards to them once they moved into the hamlet, the strategic hamlets were created. That was effective; about 200 families moved inside. They had to follow their ID cards; on the other hand, we had to go and search for those people who did not have ID cards. We warned them of the insecure conditions outside the hamlet at night and that we could not guarantee their safety if they stayed outside. If we were fired on from outside then we would have to shoot mortars out."

As might be expected, there was opposition from many families to moving into the strategic hamlets. "Some like to move in [to the strategic hamlets] to avoid bombs and bullets dropping on their houses," said one villager, "but others say they don't want to go away from their forefathers' graves and land." The head of one family who has lived in Ap Chanh for the past several years gave his opinion on the strategic hamlets, saying, "By staying outside the hamlet there are advantages as well as disadvantages to the people. That's how I see it objectively; I don't stand on either side. They collect profits easily from their own land; they don't want to leave their land. Even if they die there, they desire that. But due to the war they might be wounded by the shooting or bombs, but that only happens once in a while. Once in a while they are raided [by the Viet Cong], but they are not afraid because they can make their living. By coming over here there are advantages such as security, but it is hard to earn a living. Those who make business, they are all right; such as driving Lambrettas, horse-carts. But for those who farm and raise crops, it's hard."

Perhaps the most articulate dissension against the Strategic Hamlet Program came from one of the most interesting residents of Duc Lap. He is what is known as a rural native lawyer, a man who knows how to sue others, and although he is over 70 years of age he still participates in village activities. Under the traditional system in the village, he was a highly esteemed notable, and he still commands a great deal of respect from the other villagers. When asked which he thought would be a more profitable policy for the government, to keep the

people in strategic hamlets or to let them go back to their land, he quickly responded, "To go back to their farms. The people unanimously say these words, 'If the people are settled, then the government is peaceful.' You see, everything depends on the people. They are brought to this place [the strategic hamlets] and they just sit idle and have nothing to live on. I have a hundred piasters and I just sit here. When I spend it all, I just sit here, lean my chin on my hands and feel sorry. I worry about my property, house, farmlands, plants at home. I wonder if any cow or horse is harming my trees and plants. After sitting here, feeling sorry for a long time, and spending my money, I go to borrow 100 piasters from my neighbor, but he does not want to lend it to me. He does not want to help me. We don't help each other; we have no cooperation at all. Let's ask why is it? Because my neighbor sees me only sitting here and worrying about my property outside. He says to himself, 'If I lend this guy 100 piasters and he spends it all, where will he get the money to pay me back?' Therefore he does not lend me the money. So I have to live alone. There is no solidarity. In conclusion, we might say that no matter where we are, if they [Viet Cong] want to take advantage of us they can do so."

#### THE VIET CONG REACTION

The Viet Cong, quite expectedly, unleashed a propaganda barrage in the village against the Strategic Hamlet Program. The themes of their propaganda were generally taken from the complaints of the people. The chief of the Duc Hanh A strategic hamlet recalled that the Viet Cong said "... they came to liberate the people from these concentration camps so that they could go to their fields and freely farm their crops." Another Viet Cong message remembered by one villager was that "...they said the people would not be able to plant crops or anything to live on and they would die of hunger."

Despite the barbed wire and other defensive measures of the strategic hamlets, the Viet Cong agents continued to function in the village. In fact, it can be safely assumed that several of their agents moved into the strategic hamlets along with the other relocated families.

Viet Cong terror incidents against the population did not diminish as a result of the strategic hamlets, and, if anything, were stepped up. A hamlet chief during that time was kidnapped by the Viet Cong from his strategic hamlet. When asked if he thought the Viet Cong would kill him, he replied, "I don't really know, but they said they would. However, despite what they told me, I still worked for the national government. After my release, for over five months I did not go out of the hamlet. At night I would sleep in the hamlet, but always in a different place so that they did not know where I was."

Although this hamlet chief continued to work after his release by the Viet Cong, it is doubtful if he could ever be as effective as administrator as he was before his capture. In fact, this same man, several months later, would refuse to take part in any of the hamlet activities and would even refuse to be interviewed.

The man who was village chief during the Strategic Hamlet Program in the village recognized the fact that the Viet Cong were still able to penetrate the hamlets and contact the people. Moreover, he was aware of the existence of Viet Cong agents within the strategic hamlets. It was this function of the strategic hamlets--to keep the people and the Viet Cong separated--that was most clearly failing in Duc Lap. He recognized this problem and said, "...those who destroy our hamlet fences are people inside the hamlets. These fences were made very strong, but I have seen evidence of the fence having been broken down from the inside. The Viet Cong demand the people destroy the fence for them and threaten them if they don't comply. The people are afraid because they must go into the fields every day to work and the Viet Cong might kill them."

Another villager also saw the failure of the strategic hamlets in keeping the Viet Cong out, and he said, "I have told you they [Viet Cong] can even get inside the strategic hamlet. They come in and capture the people just the same. Why, they are even able to destroy the protected parts of the government hamlets, such as the hamlet fences. They are able to destroy the whole thing. They knock down all the iron fence posts. They cut, chop, tear down, destroy everything. They can easily remove the posts by first putting some water at the foot of

the post. As old as I am now, I can still pull up four or five posts at a time."

Perhaps the most tragic failure of the strategic hamlets was that the security which had been promised the people if they moved inside did not materialize. Instead, they were now all clustered together rather than living in their separate houses, and they felt they were even better targets for the Viet Cong mortars and bullets. One resident of a former strategic hamlet emotionally described the feeling he had when he was in a hamlet during a Viet Cong attack: "God damn it, we had to lie down quietly or else they would blow our heads off. No one dared move. We had to close the doors and stay in the houses. Pardon me, we even had to urinate inside the house. There were many people [Viet Cong]; we don't know where they came from. We could not recognize their faces because it was dark. Let them do what they wanted, but we had to be still."

Although there were many serious shortcomings in the Strategic Hamlet Program in Duc Lap, the one positive aspect of the program as far as the people of the village were concerned was the American aid they received. This was the other side of the American assistance to Vietnam, and when properly implemented was a direct benefit to the people. In fact, it seems the American Rural Aid Program went a little too far in Duc Lap. One villager recalled that "...the people began to like the Americans very much. They saw that the Americans gave them all kinds of aid. At Hau Nghia there is an American USOM captain, he gave us metal sheets and cement. He gave pigs to the poor people. He gave all sorts of things. In fact, we would rather ask something from the Americans than from our own people. They just give to us and we don't have to produce any papers. They [the Americans] say give and they give. Now the people here have seen the Americans help them."

This man's sentiments were echoed by many others in the village who had received aid. One of these recipients commented, "As I know now, the Americans came here to help us because we are poor. They bring in money to give us but will not want anything back."

### HAU NGHIA IS BORN

While the material lot of some of the people of Duc Lap improved under the Strategic Hamlet Program, the security situation remained questionable. In order to strengthen the government's position in the buffer zone between Cambodia and Vietnam immediately west of Saigon, it was decided to form a new province to better administer the area. Duc Hoa district was to be joined with three other districts to form the new province of Hau Nghia.\* The hamlet of Bao Trai, located just two miles east of Duc Lap, was selected as the province capital, and it almost doubled its population overnight. Duc Lap was also directly affected by the creation of the new province. The new road built to connect Bao Trai with National Route One--a hard-surfaced road which runs directly to Saigon--passed through the village. As soon as the road was completed, commercial buses began daily runs to Cu Chi and Saigon, giving the village direct access to the national capital. Another change was the construction of the province airfield within the village between Ap Chanh and Go Cao hamlets, parallel to the Bao Trai - Duc Lap road. The forming of the new province resulted in numerous other advantages and disadvantages to Duc Lap, some of which directly affected the people of the village.\*\*

By late 1963 it appeared that the Strategic Hamlet Program was a colossal failure in Duc Lap, and whatever hope Diem might have had to establish himself among the villagers was lost. The population became so disillusioned with the strategic hamlets that many families began slipping back to their old homes and were willing to take their chances against the Viet Cong. Both in and out of Saigon, Diem had created a wave of unpopularity toward himself that would engulf him before the new province of Hau Nghia was three weeks old.

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\* Hau Nghia province officially came into existence on October 15, 1963, as the 42nd province of the Republic of Vietnam.

\*\* These are discussed more fully in Part I of this study, RM-4552-1-ARPA.

## VII. THE NOVEMBER 1 REVOLUTION

The first news of the overthrow of Diem by ARVN troops was heard in Duc Lap on the small transistor radios owned by a few families in the village. Although details were scarce, the villagers were aware that fighting was taking place 25 miles away in Saigon.

The villagers' reactions to the news of Diem's overthrow varied. Most expressed satisfaction with the event, although some confided that they were sad because their leader had been killed, even though they had become disillusioned with him. With Diem's death, as with his beginning as president seven years earlier, the people of Duc Lap were once more hopeful of what the future would bring. This time they hoped for the war to be brought to a quick end.

The Viet Cong, on the other hand, gave the villagers little time to contemplate the coup and tried to capitalize immediately on the confusion which swept the country. The initial Viet Cong reaction was to make propaganda about the fall of Diem. Soon after the coup, the Viet Cong came to the village, and as one villager recalled, "They told us the president [Diem] listened to the Americans in order to depress our country of Vietnam so that we will be slaves, and [they said] not to follow the Americans but to follow them. They said our country belongs to our people, our race, and our ancestors."

The Viet Cong coupled their propaganda with increased pressure on the village population, and the dai-dien recalled, "...at the time Mr. Ngo was overthrown, they [Viet Cong] were thinking that they could be united with us to solve this war. Formerly, the Viet Cong let the people fight against the government, but now they realized that the government could win, so they must overcome the people by force." The willingness of the Viet Cong to use force against the population was expressed by the chief of the Duc Hanh A strategic hamlet: "...when the revolution took place the Viet Cong came and terrorized the people, forcing them to move out."

For the first few months after the November 1 revolution and after the initial Viet Cong spurt of violence, the village settled into its usual pattern of activity, preparatory to the annual rice harvest. The

name of Gen. Duong Van Minh, the hero of the revolution, was on the lips of the villagers as the new leader of their country. Unfortunately, Gen. Minh did not have time to prove what he could do for the people, as another general, Nguyen Khanh, staged a bloodless coup on January 30, 1964, and deposed Minh and several other generals.

Minh was still allowed a figurehead role in the national government, no doubt because Khanh recognized his popularity among the population of Vietnam, especially the rural dwellers. In Duc Lap, for example, after the January 30 coup, one villager commented, "While Gen. Khanh was tolerated by the people, they really wanted Minh to run the government, because the revolution [November 1] was Minh's work. If Minh was removed from the government, then the people would be very disgusted, even myself, I love him very much. Gen. Khanh has his merits, but Mr. Minh must be the head of the nation, he is the real one; Mr. Minh must possess real power."

Apparently the January 30 coup met with favorable response from the Viet Cong, at least those around Duc Lap. One man recalled, "They [the Viet Cong] said they were disgusted with President Diem, but now it seems that Khanh is better." In one of his first acts as head of the government of Vietnam, Khanh scrapped the near-defunct Strategic Hamlet Program. He replaced it with a new program called New Life Hamlets (Ap Tan Sinh). As the program was originally implemented in Duc Lap, it was difficult to see any difference between the strategic hamlets and the New Life Hamlets. Both were based on the idea of clustering the population behind barbed wire and barricades to keep them insulated from contact with the Viet Cong; both were unpopular with the people of the village. The apparent unpopularity of the New Life Hamlets was emphasized by the village police officer in a conversation about the beginning of the program in Duc Lap: "During that period they started the New Life Hamlet project, the people began to move their houses [out of the former strategic hamlets]. I could not stop them. So I arrested and slapped some of them because they tried to escape from their duties of building the New Life Hamlet. I planned to forward them to the district, but their relatives came crying to me so I released them."

Soon after the New Life Hamlets were begun, a new program for the rural areas of Vietnam was announced--pacification. Beginning in centers of security, the government pacification program would spread outward like an expanding "oil spot" until the Viet Cong guerrillas were forced out from the rural population into isolated areas where they could be destroyed by the government armed forces. Once again, the war-weary population of Duc Lap would look hopefully to the Saigon government to provide security and an opportunity for economic advancement through the new pacification program. But, whether or not the pacification program was to succeed in Duc Lap would depend not only on the government's ability to counter the Viet Cong threat but also upon the willingness of the village population to contribute to their own security and welfare.